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Meditations on a Green Light Bulb

ABSTRACT This essay is drawn from the author's book, *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing: Towards Creative-Relational Inquiry*, which explores the connections between therapy, stand-up comedy, and writing as a method of inquiry. The essay is a poetic meditation on being given the green light and not taking it. A meditation on permission, a meditation on warning: on the insistent green flash the performer heeds or ignores; and the invitations the client gives—there, then gone—there, then gone—there, then gone—that the therapist takes or misses. It is a meditation on hope, regret, and shame. **KEYWORDS** Materiality; Stand-up comedy; Therapy

PROMPTING THE GREEN LIGHT

I pass through the threshold door into the tight crowd. The MC and I cross and shake hands, and I'm there and it's familiar and comfortable. It feels good to be on the small, semicircular, wooden platform. My gallows.

Detach mic, lift the stand out of the way, and begin.

The comedy rule is you must get a laugh within the first seconds. Find a quick line that'll break the ice and let them know you're okay. If you're okay, they're okay. On the other hand, if you open with, say, a statement like "You need to know everything that happens from now is material for a book I'm writing," anyone will tell you it's not likely to go well. Instead, you sound smug and manipulative and someone not to trust. If you then move on to complain to the audience about being given only five minutes, if you also distance yourself from the usual comedy fare of jokes about failed sex, which *you're* not going to do, the declaring of all of which you imagine will captivate the audience with its hilarious and obvious ironic self-deprecation, the crack in the floor will begin to open to the chasm below.

In this moment, if you're alert, what you should do is 'fess up, because, after all, as you've said in a previous set, in stand-up you have to make judgments in the moment, in the thick of it. You should make explicit to your still-willing

audience that you can see what's happening; you should be open with them that you've got off on the wrong foot, and offer a reflexive insight that reassures them you're experienced enough to work with the immediacy of the here-and-now dynamics. You might say something like "This isn't going so well, is it? Perhaps I'll just leave now," and pretend to walk off the stage. The audience will laugh and you're back on track.

That's not what happens. Instead, I plough my relentless furrow. I tell my poor, captive audience how doing stand-up is therapy for me these days and, boy, do I need it because I have no friends, my son has emigrated to the United States, and I'm ageing and losing hope. Note I deliver this when everyone present¹ already sees me as obnoxious and can therefore quite believe I am both miserable and friendless, and deserve to be.

Now, even now, there's a way to handle this. You cut your losses and leave the stage. You check your watch, see your time is not far from being up, and you leave the stage. You're polite, you're self-deprecating, you say, "Thank you for bearing with me. I'll be off then. I'm heading back to my drawing-board."

That's not what happens. I stay. I have more, much more. I haven't rehearsed the timing and I keep going and going and going, and the green light—that well-known signal every performer needs to respect—flashes to warn me I have a minute left to wrap up. I don't notice it. Jenny, the techie, flashes the green light again a minute later. I still don't see it. When "Reet Petite" blasts from the sound system, I stand for one, two, three, four seconds too long, unable to register what's taking place. *Leave, Jonathan*, I should say to myself, *get off, go, please go*. At last, I get it, and I fumble the mic back into the stand and, to relieved applause, leave, passing the MC on the way. She shakes my hand and tries to smile.

Green Light Bulb

Green is go

Green is a call, a summons, a prompt

A light bulb
is straight and
curving glass

Green is raw

Green is young

Green is growing

Green is naive

A light bulb
is incandescent with tungsten filament
and conductors

Green is life
Green is nature, safety, soothing

A light bulb
is a silent vacuum
empty, replete with absence

Green is life
Green is nature, raging, troubled

Green is life
Green is nature, this room, this floor

A light bulb
is a teeming vacuum
“the scene of wild activities”²

Green is open
Green is inviting, ready, accepting

A light bulb
is a hedonist vacuum,
a “jubilant exploration of virtuality”³

Green is open,
Green is welcome, inclusive, available

A light bulb
is a debauched absence
full of “virtual particles . . . having a field day”⁴

Green is envy
Green is reaching, yearning, loss

A light bulb
is incandescent with noble gas
with xenon, or krypton or helium, or mercury
vapor or neon, or argon

Green is envy
Green is destructive, violent, loss

A light bulb, incandescent with argon,
charged, coursing with fire through
phosphors
becomes alive as green

Green is go
Green is permission, invitation, welcome

A light bulb,
coursing with fire in argon through
phosphors,
is incandescent with go, leave, go

Green is go
Green is go, leave, go

Waiting

Waiting

The stage is set: empty, open,
hugged by tables and chairs that spread
like dead leaves on autumn ground
meeting blood-red walls

Waiting

The stage is set: the quiet mic on its stand,
metal bodies resting on wooden floor-body
human bodies pour in and pour themselves
onto chairs and liquid bodies down open throats

Waiting

The stage is set: the mic on its stand shudders
with its own expectancy, touching itself—
“touched by all possible others”⁵
all others, there and not there, then and not then

Waiting

The MC struts and swears, mic in hand,
soft shoes, sharp eyes, keen tongue
the first laughs, then again, then again
rolling the room into the night, heat rising

Waiting

She calls, she shouts, she rouses, she summons
the man onto that stage. He's quiet, he's slow
quiet feels its way, a hush, a pause, a puzzle
a doubt, the mic heavy in his hand

Not waiting, now

A light show only for him, an explosion in his eye
there, gone, there, gone, there, gone
an explosion he does not see, will not see
and subtle light gives way to brutal sound

7 Questions to the Green Light Bulb

1. Did you know what was happening?
2. What does it mean for you to know or not know?
3. Did you care?
4. What does it mean for you to care or not care?
5. Were you, do you think, morally neutral?
6. Is such a stance possible?
7. Are you familiar with shame?

Therapy Signals

when the moment arises
as if from nowhere
a moment you're not searching for
a moment that takes you by surprise
a moment you know will come, sometime
now you sense it, now you don't

in the “minor gestures” of eyes lifting
or when he says nothing
but his sigh reaches out
against the pale wall and
brushes your cheek
now you sense it, now you don’t

or a gust of wind outside
lifts then eases the leaves,
a glimpse in the corner of your eye,
or a cat passes the window
its soft, tabby fur flattening
now you sense it, now you don’t

or when he reaches for water
like he does, like he always does
only this time there’s a catch in the move
a signal, a flash, a clustering
an opening, an invitation, a call
which now you sense, and now you don’t



JONATHAN WYATT is Professor of Qualitative Inquiry and Director of the Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry at the University of Edinburgh. His book, *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing*, was published by Routledge in 2019. Correspondence to: Jonathan Wyatt, Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences, School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh, Medical School, Teviot Place, Edinburgh EH8 9AG, UK. Email: jonathan.wyatt@ed.ac.uk.

NOTES

1. Including my fellow performers behind me in the greenroom who, I imagine, were staring in disbelief at the greenroom’s audio speaker as it channelled this unfolding disaster.

2. Tian Yu Cao and Silvan S. Schweber, “The Conceptual Foundations and the Philosophical Aspects of Renormalization Theory,” *Synthese* 97, no. 1 (1993): 39.

3. Karen Barad, “On Touching—the Inhuman that Therefore I Am,” *Differences* 25, no. 5 (2012): 210.

4. Barad, “On Touching,” 210.

5. Barad, “On Touching,” 212.